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20 January 1984

Briefing Paper for DCI: Attitudes of MNF Countries

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All three European contributors to the MNF believe that time is running out on it, and would like to see it replaced by a UN force. They are all aware that a precipitous withdrawal could lead to carnage in Lebanon and severe damage to Western political credibility in the Middle East, and would prefer an orderly transfer of responsibility.

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Both the British and Italian role in MNF is a subject of domestic political controversy. The pressure on Rome and London to withdraw their forces probably would prove irresistible if the MNF forces suffered casualties or if the effort to negotiate a peaceful settlement broke down completely. Paris has no immediate problem, but the French believe public support could erode quickly and unpredictably.

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All three capitals -- especially Paris -- distrust the staying power of their partners and would quickly reconsider their own role if they thought they detected signs of impending withdrawal on the part of one or more of them. In the meantime, the Italians -- and possibly the French -- could be moving to scale back and reposition their large contingents, perhaps to the level of their original commitment of 1,200 men each. The Italians have already begun the first stage of a phased reduction to about that level.

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Both the French and British believe that Soviet and Syrian cooperation is essential for progress toward a settlement or the establishment of an expanded UN force. They have probed for signs of interest in an expanded UN presence in Moscow and Damascus, and apparently believe that the Soviets should have at least a limited role in the peace process. Both also accept the Syrian contention that the Israeli-Lebanese agreement of 17 May is an obstacle to peace and should be put aside.

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The Italian position is more complicated because of the political rivalries and differences of senior policymakers. Socialist Prime Minister Craxi accepts the US view that the Syrians are the main obstacle to a peaceful settlement, but Christian Democratic Foreign Minister Andreotti has been sympathetic to Syrian arguments. Andreotti's position may stem in part from his interest in winning Communist support for an eventual bid for the presidency.

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